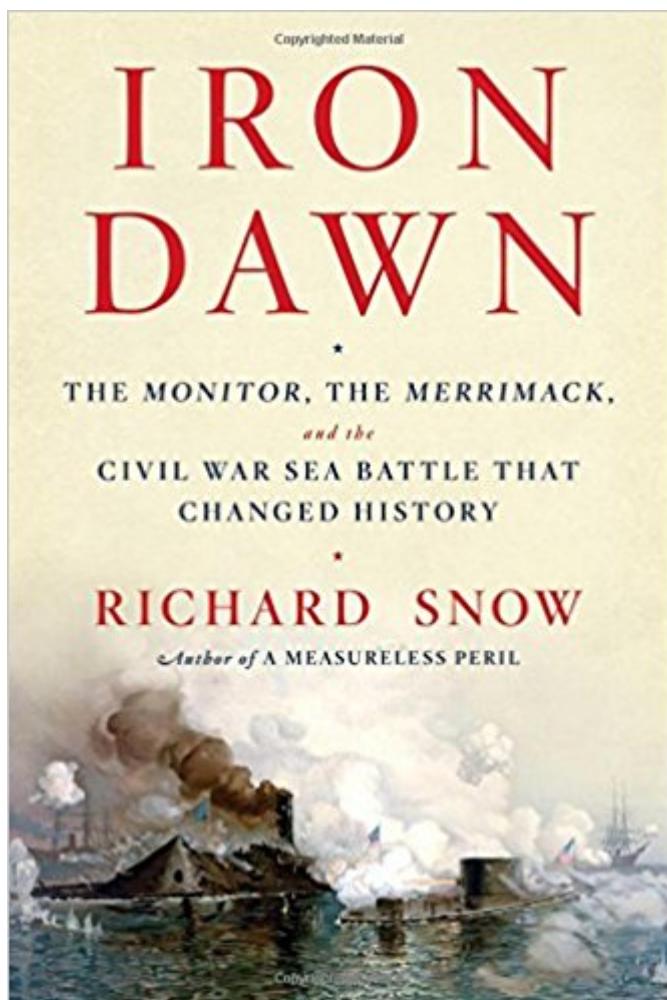


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# Iron Dawn: The Monitor, The Merrimack, And The Civil War Sea Battle That Changed History



## Synopsis

From acclaimed popular historian Richard Snow, who "writes with verve and a keen eye" • (The New York Times Book Review), the thrilling story of the naval battle that not only changed the Civil War but the future of all sea power. No single sea battle has had more far-reaching consequences than the one fought in the harbor at Hampton Roads, Virginia, in March 1862. The Confederacy, with no fleet of its own, built an iron fort containing ten heavy guns on the hull of a captured Union frigate named the Merrimack. The North got word of the project when it was already well along, and, in desperation, commissioned an eccentric inventor named John Ericsson to build the Monitor, an entirely revolutionary iron warship "at the time, the single most complicated machine ever made. Abraham Lincoln himself was closely involved with the ship's design. Rushed through to completion in just 100 days, it mounted only two guns, but they were housed in a shot-proof revolving turret. The ship hurried south from Brooklyn (and nearly sank twice on the voyage), only to arrive to find the Merrimack had arrived blazing that morning, destroyed half the Union fleet, and would be back to finish the job the next day. When she returned, the Monitor was there. She fought the Merrimack to a standstill, and saved the Union cause. As soon as word of the battle spread, Great Britain "the foremost sea power of the day" ceased work on all wooden ships. A thousand-year-old tradition ended, and the path to the naval future opened. Richly illustrated with photos, maps, and engravings, Iron Dawn is the irresistible story of these incredible, intimidating war machines. Historian Richard Snow brings to vivid life the tensions of the time, explaining how wooden and ironclad ships worked, maneuvered, battled, and sank. This full account of the Merrimack and Monitor has never been told in such immediate, compelling detail.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"A lively tale of science, war and clashing personalities . . . The charm of *Iron Dawn* comes from its ability to paddle between the quirky, prosaic world of inventors and bureaucrats and the hell of combat afloat, where death's scythe swings as swiftly as on land. By keeping a human heart beating inside the keel of two extraordinary machines, *Iron Dawn* delightfully carries the reader from the Age of Sail to the Age of Iron." *"The Wall Street Journal"* With muscular vitality, vast knowledge of military technology, and a novelist's gift for capturing vivid detail, Richard Snow retells the story of Civil War ironclads as if it is unfolding before our startled eyes for the first time. The Monitor and Merrimack have never seemed more modern, dangerous, or revolutionary as they reappear in the hands of this master storyteller. • *"Harold Holzer, author of Lincoln and the Power of the Press: The War for Public Opinion and winner of the 2015 Gilder Lehrman Lincoln Prize"* A masterful tale of the great Civil War ironclads, those strange, seemingly supernatural ships. *"One, Richard Snow tells us, looked like a rhinoceros, the other like a 'metal pie plate.'"* Their story "and that of the misunderstandings and maneuverings that preceded the Battle of Hampton Roads" is irresistible, nowhere more so than in this crackling, supremely poised account. • *"Stacy Schiff, Pulitzer Prize-winning author of The Witches, Cleopatra: A Life, and A Great Improvisation: Franklin, France, and the Birth of America"* Everybody knows about the Monitor and the Merrimack, right? Well, actually, as it turns out, we don't. In *Iron Dawn*, Richard Snow opens up the vast, enthralling world of politics, war, technology, maritime history, and human drama that lies just back of that momentous battle. Snow is a terrific writer. I can't remember when I have had such sheer fun with a Civil War book." *"S.C. Gwynne, New York Times bestselling author of Rebel Yell and Empire of the Summer Moon"* *"Iron Dawn"* is a magisterial account of one the most important battles in US naval history. It is also a wonderfully absorbing story about human beings in all their struggles both great and small. *"Richard Snow has struck gold or better yet, iron."* • *"Dr. Amanda Foreman, author of A World on Fire: Britain's Crucial Role in the American Civil War and Georgiana: Duchess of Devonshire"* Snow's energetic account encompasses issues large and small, including discussions of arms and armament; the origin of the word "splinter"; the battle's inconclusive end; a Southern joke of the day ("Iron-plated? Sir, our navy is barely contem-plated!"); Lincoln's special interest in the Union's ironclad; the difference between shells and solid shot, the mystery of the Merrimack's name; and the enthusiastic Monitor fever that swept

the relieved, almost giddy North. A few notable naval battles changed the course of wars, even history, but the clash at Hampton Roads transformed the nature of warfare itself and offered a glimpse of the 'grim modernity' Snow vividly captures." *Kirkus Reviews*, starred review: "Achieves appealing immediacy....A thorough and enthusiastic treatment, Snow's account will capture the naval-history and Civil War readership." *Booklist*: A terrific read, one which renders all previous accounts of the encounter between the Monitor and the Merrimack as obsolete as the Merrimack and Monitor made wooden war ships. • *Allan Barra*, *The Dallas Morning News*: *Iron Dawn* is a worthy read not only for serious Civil War buffs, but also for those who appreciate how ingenuity forever changed the way the military does battle on the sea. • *BookPage*: An utterly absorbing account of one of history's most momentous battles and the fascinating events and personalities that brought it about. • *Forbes*

Richard Snow was born in New York City and he graduated with a B.A. from Columbia College. He worked at *American Heritage* magazine for nearly four decades and was its editor-in-chief for seventeen years. He is the author of several books, including two novels and a volume of poetry. Snow has served as a consultant for historical motion pictures among them *Glory* and has written for documentaries, including the Burns brothers' Civil War, and Ric Burns' PBS film *Coney Island*. Most recently, he served as a consultant on Ken Burns' World War II series, *The War*.

Richard Snow is not only able to translate historical events into compelling stories, but he also manages to describe transformative technologies with lively engaging clarity. He did it in his last book -- *I Invented the Modern Age* -- which followed Henry Ford's development of the Model T. And now he's done it again in *Iron Dawn* with his narration of the extraordinary invention and construction of iron ships leading to the epic Civil War battle between the Monitor and Merrimack. Snow somehow gets beneath the skin of his research to bring historical figures to life as if he were a present witness to the events, not some academic scratching passively away at facts until their original dynamism is lost. This amazing true story reads like a novel populated with cranky inventors, brilliant engineers, self-serving and self-sacrificing politicians, and extraordinarily courageous men on both sides of the North-South line, every one directing their intense energies toward a single confrontation that changed not only the course of the Civil War but all wars afterward. Snow even manages to make his iron-clad characters as compelling as the human ones: the tough little Monitor whose deceptively whacky appearance provokes ridicule among both his

allies and enemies, and the terrifying jerry-rigged Merrimack who storms out like Darth Vader to wreak havoc on and demonstrate the death of once-invincible wooden fighting ships. And, best of all, it has an ending that makes you cry, but in a good way.

This is a story that has been often told. What is most astounding, from the standpoint of modern weapons systems design, is that two warships of radical new technology were each engineered, built and available for service within four months. It shows the pressure that the Civil War put on both North and South and how dramatically they responded. Today a similar effort would take five years. The author describes carefully and accurately the steps that led both sides to produce their designs, the personal commitment that builders and officials made to their concepts, and the matter-of-fact heroism that the crews manifested as the first battle between ironclads raged in Hampton Roads. Sadly, after their standoff, neither ship survived more than a few months. This is a comprehensive, well-researched book, not only on the technologists who designed and built the two ironclads, but on the naval secretaries and politicians and how their personalities drove the efforts of the technologists forward. The culmination of all their thoughts and efforts ended in a draw in the ironclads' fateful encounter, which somewhat deflates the story. It's certainly not the author's fault; you can't rewrite history.

Very well written. I had a sense for the importance of the duel between the Monitor and the Merrimack, and some sense for Ericsson's innovation, but this book does a great job providing a more full story. Snow provides greater understanding of key figures such as Welles, Mallory, Buchanan, Ericsson, John Worden. I had heard of the key role of Dahlgren in naval artillery and was familiar with the Brookes rifle, but this book explained the development of these weapons and how they reshaped naval warfare. There is a good explanation of the innovative features of the Monitor - but also the design challenges, flaws, and navy yard improvisation that almost led to her sinking. There is also a good explanation of the creation of the CSS Virginia (nee Merrimack) - it wasn't just as simple as placing armored plates on her. This book also provides insights into the burning (twice) of the Gosport Navy Yard, the ambiguity around the spelling of the Merrimack's name, and the reason why the Confederates ultimately scuttled the Merrimack. An all round excellent book that not only tells the tale of the Monitor v. Merrimack, but also ties together the key individuals and technological innovation that led to this watershed moment in naval history.

This is a very readable current book on the subject. It actually reads like a novel but isn't. I thought it

provided a good description of John Ericsson and his cranky nature and how he was such a self assured Swed. I would have enjoyed even more. I have 30 books on the subject and was pleased to find information I did not know. The description of how the CSS Virginia (Merriack) came out to attack the northern wooden ships and was like a ship no one had ever seen before. The description of its superstructure with the glistening pig fat on the inclined shape was electrifying. Regarding the battle with the monitor, it took Keeler's letters to his wife and used them in the sequence of the chronology. Keller was the paymaster on board the ship and was in the battle. After the battle, "the duldrums", when the ship had nothing to do but stand guard, seemed brief and the misery aboard the ship in the prolonged heat was not given its due. The sinking of the monitor was also briefer than I have seen in other books. This is a shame because the off loading most of the crew is a harrowing story that this book does not cover well enough. It also does not mention those who went down with the ship and their later discovery. Worth going to the Mariner's Museum to see. Over all, I really liked this book and highly recommend it.

I've read about 40 books on the Civil War, including a few specifically on the Monitor and Merrimack, but this book stands out in the vivid detail not just of the battle, but also of the origins and characters behind the huge coincidental meeting of the first ironclads. It's a wonderful read with far more insights than I've seen elsewhere, wonderfully done, especially about conditions aboard these ships and the Union sailing ships at Hampton Roads. My only critique is that, like most books on the subject, this one implies a drawn battle when, in fact, the Monitor scored a strategic victory by preventing the Confederates breaking the blockade. Even tactically, the Merrimack took the worst of it and wouldn't have survived another bout.

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